

## HOGSMILL RIVER STEPPING STONES

**Head of Service:** Ian Dyer, Head of Operational Services

**Report Author** Stewart Cocker

**Wards affected:** Ewell Court Ward; West Ewell Ward;

**Urgent Decision?(yes/no)**

**If yes, reason urgent decision required:**

**Appendices (attached):**

### **Summary:**

**The Environment Agency (EA) has advised that, for safety reasons, it wishes to remove the stepping stones from the Hogsmill River unless another organisation agrees to assume responsibility for their ongoing safety and maintenance.**

**This report considers the role of EEBC in protecting the stepping stones from removal whilst providing a safe crossing point.**

### **Recommendation (s)**

**The Committee is asked to:**

**(1) Agree one of the options set out 3.11 of this report.**

1.1 If option 1 or 2 is selected, delegate to the Interim Assistant Head of Service for Streetcare and the Head of Property and Regeneration in consultation with legal to enter into an agreement with the EA subject to detailed legal review, agreement of inspection and maintenance responsibilities and clarification of insurance implications.

**(2) Note the submission of the CIL application for funding the construction of a new pedestrian footbridge.**

**(3) Note any on-going inspection and maintenance costs of the stepping stones would need to be covered within the Environment committees budget envelope.**

# Environment Committee

23 June 2026

## 2 Reason for Recommendation

- 2.1 The Hogsmill River stepping stones, installed c1983, are a long established and valued feature with the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve. The EA as landowner of the riverbed and banks, has advised that it wishes to remove the stepping stones on public safety grounds unless another organisation agrees to resume responsibility for their ongoing inspection, maintenance and associated liability.
- 2.2 As EEBC owns the land either side of the river crossing, the Council may choose either to assume responsibility for the stepping stones or to consider provision of a safer, alternative crossing point, such as a pedestrian footbridge, or both.

## 3 Background

- 3.1 The EA unusually owns the bed and banks of the Hogsmill River. Despite extensive searches by the Countryside and Legal & Estates Teams, together with enquiries made to the EA and Thames Water, no formal agreement relating to the stepping stones has been found.
- 3.2 From an operational standpoint the stepping stones present two significant safety issues. Firstly, the concrete steps on the northern bank have been undermined through erosion caused by dogs entering and exiting the river at this point, creating a risk of collapse into the river. Secondly, the new wetland outflow channel has altered water levels within the Hogsmill River, resulting in prolonged submergence of the stepping stones, making them significantly more slippery than in the past.
- 3.3 Following a risk assessment undertaken by the EA which identified public safety concerns, barriers preventing access to the stepping stones were erected by the EA in September 2025.
- 3.4 At a recent meeting with EEBC, the EA advised that its preferred option is removal of the steps and stepping stones on public safety grounds unless another organisation agrees to assume responsibility for their ongoing safety. Given EEBC's ownership of the adjoining land, together with the stepping stones status as a popular and long-established feature within the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve, the Council may wish to consider whether it is prepared to assume responsibility for the crossing.
- 3.5 Whilst repair works to the northern steps and measures to reduce water levels may be achievable, the EA's position remains that the stepping stones should be removed unless another organisation agrees to assume responsibility for their ongoing, inspection, maintenance and associated liability through a formal agreement.

# Environment Committee

23 June 2026

- 3.6 Should the Council decide not to assume responsibility for the stepping stones, the EA has advised that they will be removed. In these circumstances, EEBC could consider the future provision of a pedestrian footbridge as a safer and more accessible alternative crossing point within the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve.
- 3.7 Alternatively, should the Council agree to assume responsibility, consideration could still be given to the future provision of a pedestrian footbridge to provide a safer and more accessible alternative crossing route whilst retaining the stepping stones as a heritage feature.
- 3.8 If members would like to assume responsibility for the stepping stones, measures would need to be taken to address the current risks. This could include warning signs, anti-slip surfacing, handrails, quarterly inspections, defect reporting and planned and reactive maintenance. However, such measures would reduce rather than eliminate the ongoing public safety risks associated with the crossing.
- 3.9 A pedestrian footbridge would provide improved accessibility for users of all ages and abilities, with the additional benefit of improved access to the newly created Chamber Mead wetland area.
- 3.10 In terms of costs, a new footbridge will likely cost over £100k including design and planning fees. For example, the new footbridge constructed across the wetland outflow channel cost approximately £130,000 to construct. Under the provision of green infrastructure Strategic CIL funding is a possible source of financing the capital costs and a Strategic CIL application has been submitted and remains subject to assessment should this be the preferred option.
- 3.11 Options
  - 3.11.1 Option 1: agree to take on the liability for the steps and stepping stones subject to being able to drop the water level, undertake immediate repair works, agree a formal inspection and defect reporting regimes and undertake maintenance of the steps and stepping stones.
  - 3.11.2 Option 2: agree to take on the liability for the steps and stepping stones subject to being able to drop the water level, undertake immediate repair works and continue to maintain the steps and stepping stones. Agree to deliver a new footbridge as an alternative safer fully accessible crossing point subject to being granted CIL funding and securing additional funding for the design and planning of a footbridge.
  - 3.11.3 Option 3: do not agree to take on the liability for the steps and stepping stones and acknowledge the EA will remove them.

# Environment Committee

23 June 2026

3.11.4 Option 4: Agree to deliver a new footbridge as an alternative safer fully accessible crossing point subject to being granted CIL funding and securing additional funding for the design and planning of a footbridge.

## 4 Risk Assessment

Legal or other duties

### 4.1 Equality Impact Assessment

4.1.1 The stepping stones have provided a well-used river crossing for over forty years. A new foot bridge would provide a safer river crossing for all ages and abilities.

### 4.2 Crime & Disorder

4.2.1 A well-used public open space is invariably a safer open space, either retaining the stepping stones or provision of a footbridge or both will maintain access and help prevent antisocial behaviour.

### 4.3 Safeguarding

4.3.1 None for the purposes of this report.

### 4.4 Dependencies

4.4.1 None for the purposes of this report.

### 4.5 Other

4.5.1

## 5 Financial Implications

5.1 If the committee decides to take on liability for the safety and maintenance of the stepping stones there will be an immediate cost, approximately £1,000 to repair the undermined concrete steps on the northern bank. On going maintenance of the stepping stones is however minimal and would be covered by existing budgets. For example, the repair to the steps is as far as is known, the first repair in over forty years. In contrast a new footbridge will require a much larger sum to be secured via CIL for construction, with ongoing maintenance costs, such as painting every 15 to 20 years to control corrosion that currently could cost in the region of £8000. Funds for the design and planning stages of the new footbridge will need to be sought from the Strategy and Resources Committee.

5.2 **Section 151 Officer's comments:** Financial implications are contained within the body of the report.

# Environment Committee

23 June 2026

## 6 Legal Implications

6.1 Any agreement to assume liability for the stepping stones should be subject to detailed legal review, agreement of inspection and maintenance responsibilities and clarification of insurance implications.

6.2 **Legal Officer's comments:** as detailed above

## 7 Policies, Plans & Partnerships

7.1 **Council's Key Priorities:** The following Key Priorities are engaged:

- Safe and well maintained – by providing well managed green spaces for people to go out and enjoy we are helping to improve our residents' and visitors' health and wellbeing and also protecting nature.
- Green and Vibrant – by managing the Borough's nature reserves, we make our open spaces wonderful places for both and people and wildlife. The green spaces found in Epsom and Ewell are one of the main reasons people choose to live here.

7.2 **Service Plans:** The matter **is not** included within the current Service Delivery Plan. The importance of maintaining good public access within the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve is described in the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve Management Plan 2017 to 2117.

7.3 **Climate & Environmental Impact of recommendations:** Improving access to our open spaces encourages residents to stay local and reduce car journeys.

7.4 **Sustainability Policy & Community Safety Implications:** As above in 6.3

7.5 **Partnerships:** EEBC take part in the Hogsmill Catchment Partnership which aims to achieve significant improvements in both biodiversity and public access to the Hogsmill River.

7.6 **Local Government Reorganisation Implications:** The construction of a new footbridge would be post 1<sup>st</sup> April 2027.

## 8 Background papers

The documents referred to in compiling this report are as follows:

### Previous reports:

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### Other papers:

- [Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve 2017 - 2117](#)